

**Special Committee on Aging**  
***Crime without Criminals?***  
***Seniors, Dementia and the Aftermath***

**March 22, 2004**

**OPENING STATEMENT**  
**of**  
**Senator John Breaux**

I would first like to take this opportunity to thank all of the witnesses who have come to testify today. Your testimony is of great value to the Committee as we work to address the critical challenges our country faces in providing proper mental health care to our nation's seniors. In addition, I would like to thank Chairman Craig for his support of this hearing.

Our nation confronts a pending wave of 77 million aging baby boomers. The purpose of this Committee is to help this country re-think and re-define how we age and to continue to find ways to further enhance the quality of life for older Americans and their families.

Last Congress, I initiated a series of hearings on ageism. To that end, this Committee examined various forms of ageism, this pervasive discrimination against seniors that permeates our health care system. Last year, I chaired several Aging Committee hearings that explored ageism in our nation's health care system. We learned that medical ageism is pervasive. It can be found in the use of preventive screenings, clinical trials for valuable treatments, the treatment of hospital-borne infections and in the way mental health care is provided to seniors. With respect to ageism in mental health care, we learned that older Americans have the highest suicide rate in America – a rate four times the national average. Even more disturbing, 75 percent of suicide victims saw their doctor within one month of their suicide, but were not treated or referred for treatment for their depression.

Today, this Committee will hear testimony about another form of ageism in mental health care for older Americans. We will examine dementia and the extreme level of tragedy this condition can reach if left untreated by our health care system and misunderstood by our law enforcement and judicial systems. This hearing will focus on a recent tragedy in Florida that exemplifies a growing problem evident across the nation facing older individuals suffering from dementia. I would like to particularly thank several members of Mr. Ivan Gotham's family here in the audience today and who have been very supportive in the preparation of this hearing. I realize this is an extremely difficult time for you, but want to thank you for your support and extend my sincerest condolences for the loss of your father.

Although violent crimes committed by older individuals with dementia appear to be rare, we cannot be certain this is true because of the scarcity of research and data collection. Nonetheless, we continue to see an increasing number of instances of severe violence associated with dementia. In fact, we have compiled a number of stories of this nature from around the country.

We simply must find ways to prevent even one unnecessary loss of life. This is particularly urgent, since it is possible to prevent these tragedies by encouraging more research and increased training for family members, health care providers, mental health care professions, law enforcement and the court system. I prepared the charts on my right to assist people in recognizing the symptoms of potential violent behavior in older individuals with dementia who may need professional intervention. Further, I recognize we must continue to balance the needs of individuals with dementia with the need to protect the public.

I introduced the Positive Aging Act, S. 1456, to help seniors receive the mental health care that they need. It provides grants for demonstration projects to integrate mental health services for seniors into primary care settings. I believe the passage of the Elder Justice Act, S. 333, will provide the necessary research, data collection, and training to enhance our understanding of the care and treatment needed for seniors.

Today, we take another important step towards ensuring seniors the mental health care they need. I look forward to hearing testimony from our panel of witnesses.

Before introducing the witnesses, I would like to recognize other Senators for any opening remarks.